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Geneviève Zubrzycki,

Beheading the Saint: Nationalism, Religion, and Secularism in Quebec

Religion, secularity, and the hermeneutics of nationalism

John R. Hall

Beheading the Saint uses the St. Jean Baptiste parade as a key theme by which to trace the interplays of religion, nationalism, secularism, and society in Québec history. During the parade in 1969, a group of protesters toppled the float with a papier-mâché statue of St. Jean Baptiste, breaking off his head – an incident that became interpreted as *beheading* the saint. This, Geneviève Zubrzycki takes to be a key historical “event” that both reflected and drove the so-called *Revolution tranquille*, or “Quiet Revolution” – that period in the 1960s when Québec shifted radically but relatively peacefully from a Catholic-French nationalism to a more secular nationalist society. This transition was complex, and one of the great things about *Beheading the Saint* is that it does not force binary meanings onto ambiguities. The book is more an exercise in hermeneutic subtlety than semiotic grid work. It artfully and coherently draws together a variety of themes: material culture, especially icons; parades; language, especially wordplay; symbolic politics; political history; visual culture; cultural tropes and their historicity; and the unfoldingness of events.

Zubrzycki's book is centrally concerned with the “shifting relationship between nationalism, religion, and secularism in a society which was, until the late 1960s,

exemplary of what Charles Taylor calls the ‘Neo-Durkheimian’ link between national identity and religion, wherein ‘the sense of belonging to the group and confession are fused in the moral issues of the group’s history tend to be coded in religious categories’” (p.3). Analytically, the book concentrates on three topics – first, the period *before* the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, when initial French colonization and subsequent British and then Canadian rule shaped a fusion of French *Catholic* identity and French *Canadian* identity centered in Québec but not exclusive to it – what Michael Hechter, in his book *Internal Colonialism*, calls the “reactive solidarity” of a less powerful group that has more to gain by hanging together than by assimilating; second, the dramatic *transition* of the Quiet Revolution; and third, the years since, when *ambivalent* engagements with nationalism, religion, and secularism have left Québec with a much more ambiguous sense of nation and a curious yet important legacy of Catholicism – a set of developments that continues to unfold.

The Church promoted a national identity for Québec that was framed in Catholic religious terms, marked by an ideology of cultural survival. Under these conditions St. John the Baptist came to figure as the iconic representative of an *ethno-religious* identity that was simultaneously Catholic and French. Pope Pius IX declared him the patron saint of French Canadians in North America in 1908. Importantly, people of culturally French origins were scattered all across Canada, and Québec included significant numbers of people who were neither French nor Catholic. Thus, cultural survival as an ideology left Québec without a clear basis of national identity while relegating its French population to economic backwardness and political domination by (Protestant) Canada.

The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s changed all this. The death of Premier Maurice Duplessis in 1959 was the precipitating event that yielded dramatic changes to politics, the economy, culture, and religion. New political parties emerged, private electrical companies were nationalized, the state became a key agent in promoting economic development, and a provincial welfare state was created in part through “the secularization of social services previously controlled by the Church” (p.6). With these political and economic developments came dramatic *social* and *cultural* changes. Notably, participation in the Church declined radically and fertility rates plummeted. These events were framed culturally in relation to an abandonment of French-Canadian identity permeated by Catholicism and its displacement by a new Québécois identity centered on a secular, civic nation as a territory.

Zubrzycki traces this cultural shift through a fascinating narrative about the transformation of *La Fête de Jean-Baptiste* from a religiously infused celebration of Francophone culture to a holiday celebrating Québec as a proto-nation, but with decreasing attachment to John the Baptist and his Catholic symbology, culminating in the saint’s “beheading” during the parade of 1969, which became the meaning that stamped the event. With St. John “beheaded,” so, seemingly, was Catholic Francophone Québec.

But as Zubrzycki shows in the book’s third section, Québec national identity remains contested, and the rise of secular institutions has hardly meant the demise of religion as a significant force. In part, these developments (which Zubrzycki rightly observes can hardly be called a conclusion) have been shaped by two failed nationalist referenda to assert Québec’s political sovereignty from Canada, in 1980 and 1995.

In dialectical relation to these failures at sovereignty, Zubrzycki traces the persistence of religion in two main currents: first, the issue of “reasonable accommodation” of religious practices within a secular state, pertaining both to Catholicism and to other religions in the increasingly multicultural society of (especially urban) Québec; and second, the vexed issue of how to treat remnant Catholicism that materially and culturally permeates Québécois institutions and its state. She shows a double standard at work: accommodation of religious expression has its limits, which fall more heavily on Muslims and Jews than on Catholics, for under the principle of “cultural patrimony,” Catholic symbols remain in place in key material locations, most notably, in the National Assembly. Thus, Québec society and its polity continue to struggle with religion in ways dominated by the legacy of Catholicism. Ostensibly secular institutions are legitimated as “sacred” in a distinctively Catholic way. Zubrzycki concludes that it is important to study “‘religion beyond religion,’ that is, as it is imbricated in various social, political, and cultural processes” (p.188). *Beheading the Saint* thus yields much to think about concerning religion under conditions of secularity. Because I have sometimes described myself as a “recovering Calvinist,” I especially appreciate Zubrzycki’s invocation of “recovering Catholics.” As she rightly observes, sociologists of religion need to move beyond a narrowly Durkheimian definition in order to understand the more pervasive dispensations of religion in our era – beyond organizations, beyond institutions.

Beheading the Saint is a rich book, of importance for the sociology of religion, for studies of nationalism, as an exemplar in the analysis of material culture, icons, and social change, and for the vexed problem of secularity in relation to religion. I deeply appreciate how Zubrzycki’s analytic strategy so closely links shifts in cultural symbols

and meanings to specific events and social actions. Culture here is not some free-floating code: it is carried, improvised upon, and contested in everyday and public life. Potential semiotic analyses notwithstanding, Zubrzycki shows that meaningful shifts cannot be *reduced* to binary oppositions. As she observes, cultural symbols often have an *excess* of meanings potentially associated with them. The *indeterminacy* of symbolic shifts, combined with the multiplicities of their layerings, means that cultural shifts need to be understood hermeneutically, in their nuances and complexities. Moreover, like Max Weber but at a local scale, Zubrzycki demonstrates that framings of meanings may have consequences *unintended* by the agents who engaged in events precipitating them. The protesters who knocked off the paper-maché head of St. Jean-Baptiste could not have anticipated that the event would come to be interpreted as a “beheading,” but they laid a cultural track that facilitated it.

Beheading the Saint vividly demonstrates the cultural shifts that took place in relation to the Quiet Revolution. Zubrzycki shows how the Festival parade came under increasing pressure from opponents who characterized it as embodying a conservative, passive Québec. But she acknowledges that the key triggering event of change was the death of Premier Maurice Duplessis in 1959, a full decade before the “the beheading.” And she acknowledges the variety of political, economic, and other structural changes that transformed Québécois society during the Quiet Revolution. Yet her main theme is cultural transformation, especially as embodied in the parade. So there is the intriguing question: how might any causal relationship between cultural and other developments be characterized? Here, *Beheading the Saint* could be more specific. In one passage, Zubrzycki characterizes the “opposition to the religious narrative of the nation” as

triggering “symbolic transformations, culminating in the beheading ... and *contributing to* the demise of French Canadianness and the crystallization of a new Québécois identity” (p.76). Elsewhere (p.86), remaining within the realm of cultural meanings, she argues that the 1963 removal of the Lamb from the parade tableau “*led to* the dethroning and beheading.” Later, in a less robust formulation, “the reconfiguration of national identity was *carried out* not only in institutions and through the renegotiation of church-state relations, but *also* through an aesthetic revolt...” (p.182). And after a few pages, we are told, “without paying attention to these multiple dimensions of aesthetic revolt it would be *difficult to explain* how a new national identity could dislodge another one” (p.184, italics added to all quotes). Connecting cultural shifts, even this well documented, is a challenging task. For that very reason, it will be important to reflect further on how to connect cultural transformations – in more causal or explanatory terms – to social and political transformations such as those wrought in the Quiet Revolution.

Comparative observations will help build on Zubrzycki’s superb book toward a broader analysis of religion, revolutionary social transformation, and secularity. For example, there are obviously radical differences between the Quiet Revolution and the French Revolution of 1789, but a striking continuity and parallels too. The French Revolution was a *dual* revolution, both overthrowing the absolutist Royal state and rejecting Catholicism by imposing a resolutely secular state and a secular “religion.” To be sure, many other revolutions have engaged religion. Anticipating the Soviet one, the French combined a political revolution with an anti-religious one. Earlier efforts to institute a Reformation in France had been suppressed. With the French Revolution, reformation would be eclipsed entirely. Of course, Catholicism did not disappear in

France: its status was radically altered, and in ways that are paralleled by developments in Québec.

Québec, Zubrzycki emphasizes, was subjected to double colonization – first as a colony of France, then of Great Britain (and after 1867, Canada), but under the ideological auspices of French Catholicism (p.73). In early nineteenth-century Québec, resistance to assimilation was led ideologically by the Catholic Church, which thereby became associated with rule by political conservatives. Thus, as in France, the Quiet Revolution was both a revolution against political rule – in this case, by surrogates who legitimated the maintenance of Québec as a “colony” of the wider Canadian state – and a revolution against the conservative religious ideology that, revolutionaries argued, sustained Québec as a “backward” society.

There is a genetic historical connection: in the wake of the French Revolution many ultraconservative clerics fled France for Québec, presumably bolstering a sort of royal Catholicism there (p.53). In France in 1685, Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes, saying there would be *une foi, une loi, un roi* – one faith, one law, one King. In 1908 the Archbishop of Québec city invoked Samuel de Champlain, the founder of the city, to the effect that “to be French was to be Catholic and to be Catholic was to be a better Frenchman.”

Both post-revolutionary France and post-revolutionary Québec contend with what Zubrzycki calls the “phantom limb” of Catholicism, the limb no longer there that feels like it still is! Both struggle with “reasonable accommodation” or lack thereof, for religious groups in a society that has become secular, but secular under conditions in which many citizens are what Zubrzycki rightly calls “recovering Catholics.”

As this brief comparison with France suggests, Zubrzycki's book opens the door to comparative study of the state, ideology, and religion under conditions of secularity. As she emphasizes, secularity has hardly eclipsed religion. What we need to learn more about is how religion articulates with other institutions and with publics under putatively secular conditions. My suspicion is that, just as Charles Tilly suggested different societies have different "repertoires of contention," so too, culture, in this case, French-inflected Catholic political culture, creates a repertoire of secularity. What will we find that such repertoires look like in other societies?